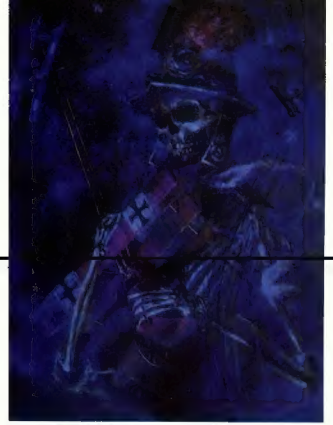
GEORGE PRATT

ENEMY ACE

WAR IDYLL

ENEMY ACE

DC COMICS



GEORGE PRATT
writer & illustrator

Willie Schubert ❖ *letterer*

ENEMY ACE WAR IDYLL

ENEMY ACE created by
Robert Kanigher & Joe Kubert

INTRODUCTION

JOE KUBERT

About a year ago, I had the good fortune of meeting George Pratt, and seeing this body of work in progress. There are few things that give me as much pleasure as I derive from drawing, and seeing other artists' work is one of those things.

When I first saw George's incredible paintings depicting the high drama of this story (which he also wrote), I was impressed and pleased at the same time. Having written and drawn "Enemy Ace" myself (the character was created by the great editor/writer Robert Kanigher), I could fully appreciate the research and background material necessary to make this production an effective one.

To my mind, George has taken the Red Tri-Wing Fokker and Hans von Hammer to new heights (pardon the pun). The story has given additional depth to the character of von Hammer. Now an old man in the twilight of his life, he relives a time when his world was young and vibrant. The connection is made between all wars, and the acuity of senses and emotions as a result of death's close proximity. And George has made me believe that two-dimensional beings, drawn and painted, actually live.

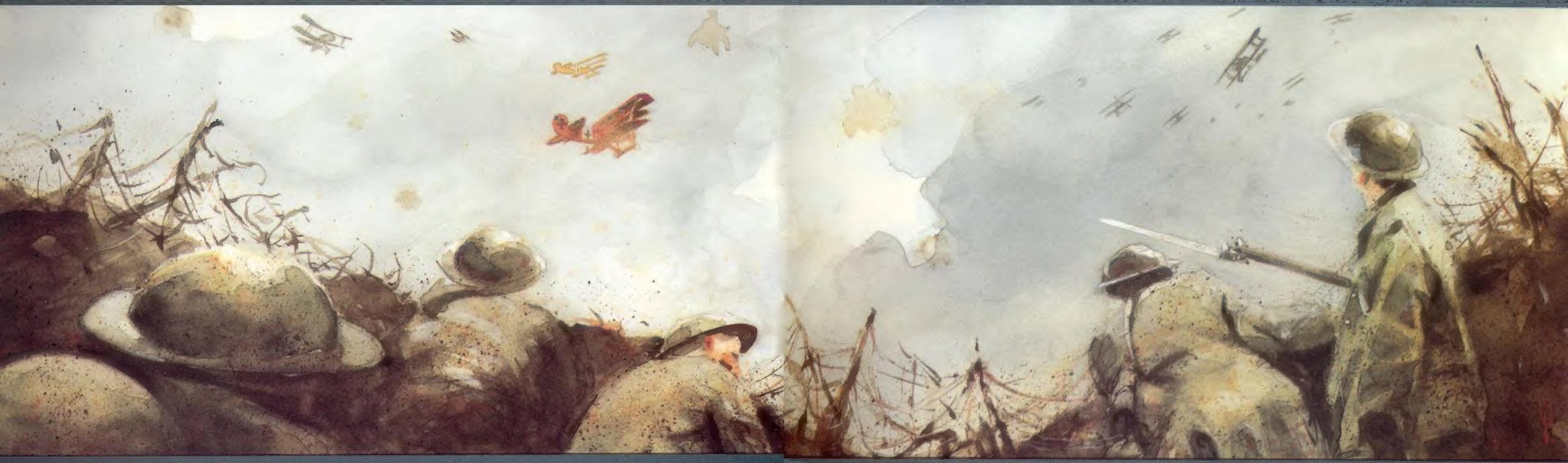
George's illustrations are remarkable. Unquestionably, he is in the vanguard of creative people in our profession who are pointing the way for all of us.

It's evident that this effort was a labor of interest, involvement and love. I think the accomplishment is formidable.

All men must die
but it is given
to few to die
for their country.

— Epitaph, 1915,
to Colonel Breakspear,
in Henley Church

CHAPTER ONE

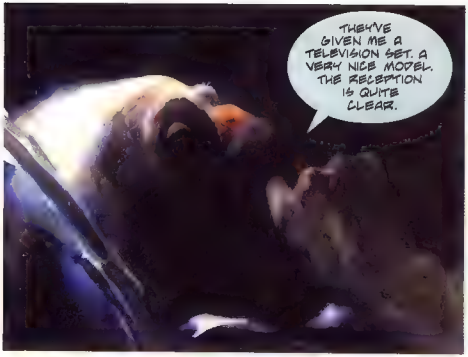


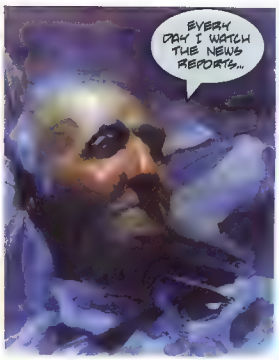
...VON HAMMER?
HERR VON HAMMER?

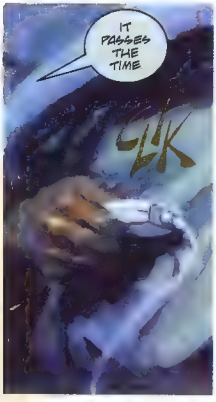
ISLE OF FÖHR/WEST GERMANY/NOVEMBER 1969

WA-? BITTE EINTRETEN!
GUTEN MORGEN! ICH BIN EDWARD MANNOCK, ICH HABE AN SIE... UH... GESCHRIEBEN...
AH, THE REPORTER. HAVE A SEAT, MISTER MANNOCK. AND ENGLISH WILL DO.
DANKE-- MY GERMAN'S PRETTY RUSTY, AND I DIDN'T KNOW YOU SPOKE ENGLISH SO WELL.
I SPEAK IT...WELL ENOUGH. BUT I STILL DO NOT UNDERSTAND WHY YOU WISH TO SPEAK TO ME.
WELL, THE MAGAZINE I WORK FOR IS RUNNING A SERIES ON SOLDIERS WHO'VE BEEN AWARDED MEDALS OF HONOR. I'VE BEEN ASSIGNED TO COVER ALL THE WINNERS OF THE GERMAN FOUR IE MERITE--THE BLUE MAX.

WHEN I HEARD YOU WERE HERE, I WAS ABLE TO CONVINCE THEM TO RUN AN IN-DEPTH PROFILE ON YOU. IT WASN'T DIFFICULT-- ALL I HAD TO DO WAS REMIND THEM THAT YOU WERE THE GREATEST ACE OF WWI.
THE REPORTS OF MY VICTORIES IN THE SKY HAVE BEEN EXAGGERATED BY HISTORY-- AND OVERZEALOUS JOURNALISTS.
RIGHT, WA... WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO TURN ON SOME LIGHTS?
NO, I'M FINE. THE ROOM LOOKS BETTER IN THE DARK.
OKAY... FIRST I NEED TO CONFIRM SOME BACKGROUND INFORMATION-- ROUTINE STUFF FOR EXAMPLE, I KNOW YOU WERE MARRIED AND THAT YOU WERE DIVORCED IN 1947...
YOUR EYES.
YOU DIDN'T TELL ME YOU WERE A SOLDIER, MISTER MANNOCK.
I--
IT'S WRITTEN IN YOUR FACE. YOU'VE SEEN DEATH AT CLOSE QUARTERS.
SMELLED THE IRON OF BLOOD IN THE AIR.
YOU ARE A SOLDIER, MISTER MANNOCK.
YOU WILL ALWAYS BE A SOLDIER.


THEY'VE GIVEN ME A TELEVISION SET. A VERY NICE MODEL. THE RECEPTION IS QUITE CLEAR.


EVERY DAY I WATCH THE NEWS REPORTS...


IT PASSES THE TIME

DAS AMERIKANISCHES MILITÄR BRINGT ANSCHULDIGUNGEN GEGEN LIEUTENANT WILLIAM L. CALLEY, JUNIOR.
ER SOLLTE ZAHLLOSE UNBEWAFFNETE, NICHT WIDERSTAND LEISTENDE...

VIET NAMESISCHE ZIVILPERSONEN ERMORDET HABEN IN DEM JETZT SOGENANTEM MY LAI MASSENMORD..
MASSENMORD? WHO WAS MASSACRED?!
...IT SEEMS THIS LIEUTENANT CALLEY..

...IS CHARGED WITH THE MURDER OF VIETNAMESE CIVILIANS...
"IN THE HAMLET OF MY LAI...
...WOMEN AND CHILDREN..."

"...ARE THEY THE ENEMY NOW?
"IT WASN'T LIKE THAT FOR ME.
" FOR ANY OF US.
"WE WERE LED BY CONSCIENCE

CONSCIENCE?
CONSCIENCE DIDN'T COUNT FOR ANYTHING OVER THERE. YOU JUST DID WHAT YOU HAD TO DO TO STAY ALIVE. NOTHING ELSE MATTERED.
TOOK ME A WHILE TO FIGURE THAT OUT. I DON'T KNOW. I JUST WASN'T PREPARED, I GUESS.
NEITHER WAS I. I DON'T THINK ONE CAN BE.
WAR IS ONE OF LIFE'S INEVITABLE ABERRATIONS.
CLIK
A PARADOX. NOTHING BUT AN ENDLESS LOOP OF ABSURD CONTRADICTIONS. BOREDOM AND ROUTINE PUNCTUATED BY SLAUGHTER.

VON HAMMER

I knew a man when I was young. Ernst Brechtman. A butcher. He seemed old to me then, but he couldn't have been more than 40. One of the kindest men I've ever known. I visited his slaughterhouse once and watched him kill 26 lambs. He would throw the animals onto a long cement slab, pull their heads back, and, using a curved knife sharpened on an old stone pedal grinder, open their throats. The pulsing blood poured into a trough that fed through every room of the charnel house before emptying into the river.

As the animals drained, Ernst sat down on a grimy wooden stool at the near end of the slab. I could see that he was covered in blood as he lit his pipe and relaxed. I welcomed the smoke. It helped to mask the smell of blood. He filled his lungs several times. Then he looked up at me. As a hundred lambs' legs thrashed behind him, framing his dark bloody face in a nimbus of white light, he smiled. A smile in spite of everything I'd seen. I recognized that wide, toothy grin--and it was only then that he became the Ernst that I'd known.

Ernst Brechtman was content. He did his job and then rewarded himself with a smoke. There were no doubts, no questions. He served a purpose.

That memory sustained me as a soldier.

VON HAMMER
I came to envy him his indifference. But at the same time, I thanked God that I could never become indifferent.

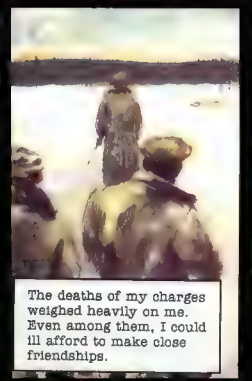
MANNOCK
If you'd been indifferent, would it have made you a better soldier, do you think? I mean no offense, but it seems odd to hear these sentiments from a man who was known as the "Killing Machine."

VON HAMMER
My country needed me back then. It was my duty to serve, however much my personal feelings troubled me. I ran my squadron efficiently, and saw to it that the young men in my charge were prepared to meet the enemy and destroy him; I stressed that if they didn't kill, they would surely die.

In a dogfight, indecision can be fatal. The sky becomes a whirlwind of twisting planes and tracers. Instinct guides your hands. You and your machine meld to become a creature of the air. You dive, weave, set yourself up for a kill, and all the time, there's no time to think. Your whole body is an exposed nerve, sensitive to the subtlest maneuvers of your elusive prey. If you are attuned with your body, with your machine, and with your target, you will succeed in your mission. But if you are not-- if you have even the slightest moment of hesitation--

Vengeance played no part. It was inappropriate. So were the congratulations of my peers, who seemed to revel in their victories. They toasted the god of war for their success--even as they secretly prayed for his mercy in the future.

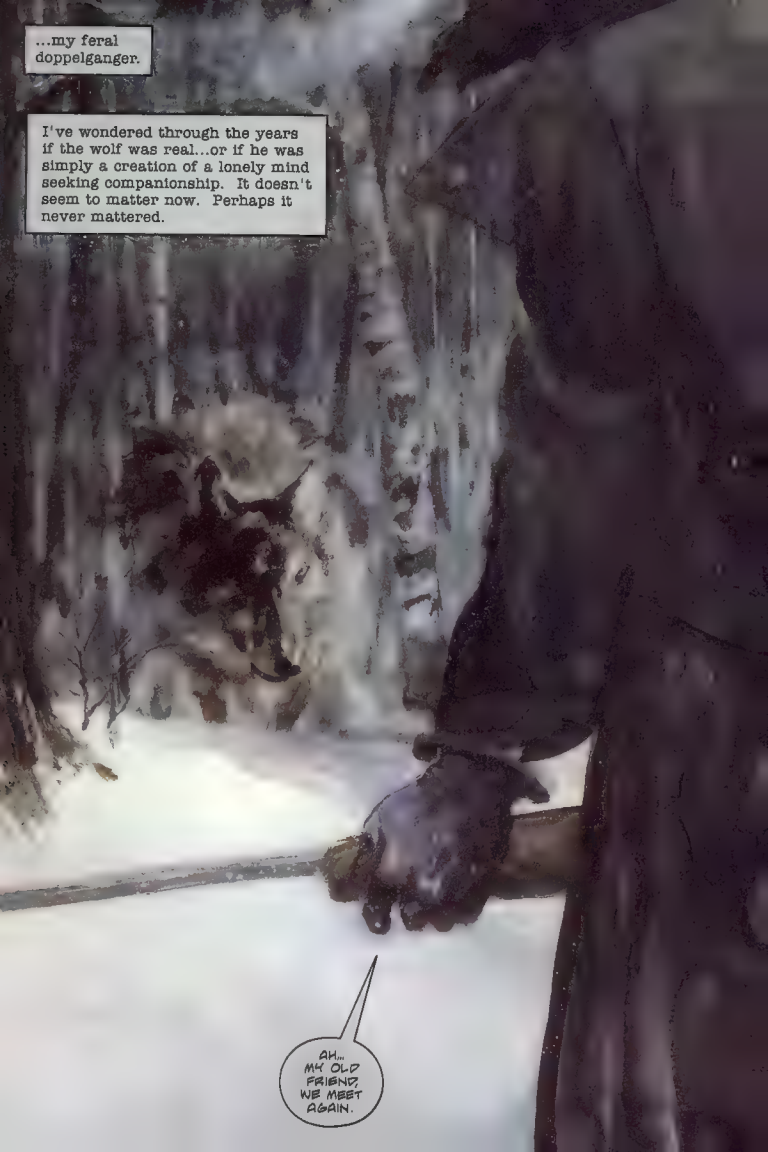
I could not be a party to that. In time, they learned to keep their distance when I returned from a mission.



The deaths of my charges weighed heavily on me. Even among them, I could ill afford to make close friendships.

If I had a true peer, he wasn't human...

I had no peers, save one...

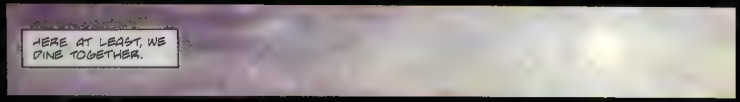

...my feral doppelganger.
I've wondered through the years if the wolf was real...or if he was simply a creation of a lonely mind seeking companionship. It doesn't seem to matter now. Perhaps it never mattered.
AH... MY OLD FRIEND, WE MEET AGAIN.

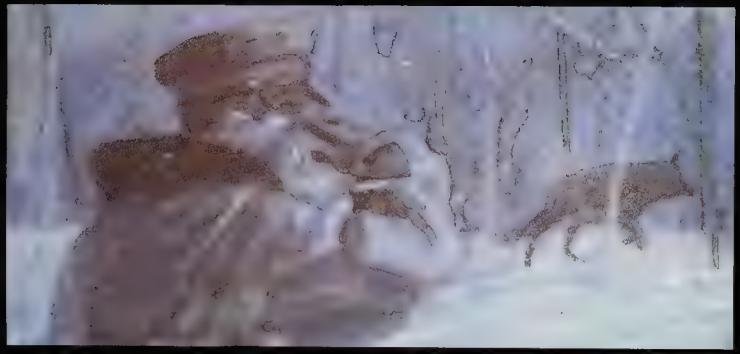
THREE TODAY. THREE BOYS. THEY HAD HEART. BUT HEART CAN'T SAVE YOU. NOT IF YOU LACK THE SKILL TO LIVE.
WE'RE TWO OF A KIND OLD FELLOW. CHALLENGERS COME AND GO, BUT WE LIVE ON. WE CARRY THE SCARS OF BATTLE AS EMBLEMS OF STRENGTH.
HOW MANY LIVES HAVE WE TAKEN, YOU AND I?
DO YOU SEE THEM? I DO. THE DEAD PEER AT ME FROM THE DARK PLACES, WAITING. THERE IS NO HATE LEFT IN THEM.
"COME WITH US," THEY SEEM TO BE SAYING. THEIR VOICES FILLED ONLY WITH PITY FOR THE ONES THAT LIVE ON.

I ENVY YOU, MY OLD FRIEND.

YOU LIVE IN A NATURAL WORLD. YOU KILL WHEN YOU'RE HUNGRY.

I KILL BECAUSE I'M TOLD TO.


HERE AT LEAST, WE DINE TOGETHER.



MAYBE I'D BETTER COME BACK TOMORROW WHEN YOU'RE NOT SO TIRED
CLICK!
REC
REW
PLAY
YES, I THINK THAT'S BEST.
SLEEP WELL.
"COME WITH US," YOU SAY.

I CAN SEE YOUR BEAUTIFUL SAD YOUNG FACES, YOUR GREAT SHINING AND LOVING EYES...
AND I KNOW THAT I'M THE DEFEATED

CHAPTER T · W · O

But there may yet be a development in our understanding of the unspeakable wretchedness of our human life and perhaps all this is leading us to it; so much calamity — as though new dawns were seeking distance and space for their unfolding.

— Rainer Maria Rilke/1914

DEAR GOD...

WWI

IS THIS MY WAR?

THE BATTLEFIELD IS DIFFERENT, BUT THE RESULT IS THE SAME.

ALWAYS THE SAME.

I KNOW THESE FACES... KNOW THESE MEN...

I SERVED WITH THEIR SONS... AND WATCHED THEM JOIN THEIR FATHERS...

IF ONLY I COULD GET THIS SHIT OUT OF MY HEAD. BUT I CAN'T. DAMN PICTURES ARE EVERYWHERE...IN EVERYTHING.

I CLOSE THE BOOKS BUT I KEEP SEEING THE FACES...

...IN BLACK AND WHITE THE UNIFORMS ALMOST LOOK THE SAME...

HUMM.. GOD DAMN PHOTOS..

CLIK

BLAM

CLIK

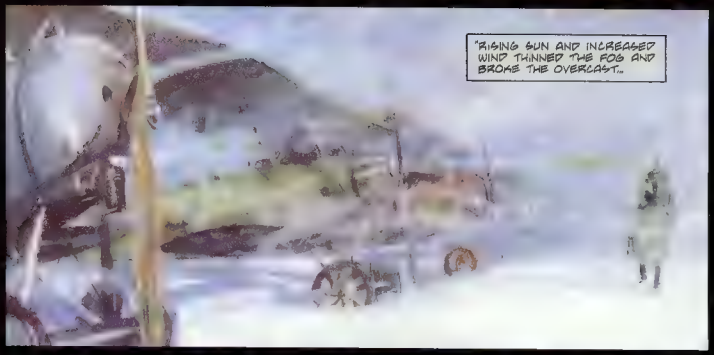
BLAM

DO WE HAVE TO WATCH THIS?
KLIK
THANKS. IT'S A LITTLE TOO EARLY FOR THAT.
I THINK IT'S TOO LATE.
SELF-IMMOLATION. WHY WOULD ANYONE DO IT? THE REPORT SAID THEY STARTED IN 1963. WHY? DO YOU KNOW WHY THEY DO IT?
BECAUSE THE WHOLE WORLD HAS FINALLY GONE MAD.
SOMETIMES I THINK IT HAPPENED A LONG TIME AGO. "AFTER TWO-THOUSAND YEARS OF MASS, WE'VE GOT AS FAR AS POISON GAS," THEY USED TO SAY.
YOU'D THINK WE'D HAVE COME TO OUR SENSES BY NOW...

HOW CAN THEY, WHEN ALL THEY GET IS PROPAGANDIST CRAP EVERY STEP OF THE WAY? FROM THE MINUTE YOU'RE BORN, TO YOUR FIRST DAY IN COUNTRY, THEY TELL YOU WHAT'S RIGHT AND PROPER AND NO ONE'S THERE TO ARGUE
I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT I WAS GETTING INTO... ANY MORE THAN YOU DID I SUPPOSE.
I MEAN, DID YOU BELIEVE IN IT? YOUR WAR?
I BELIEVED IN HONOR.

CAPPY EAST OF THE SOMME/
FRANCE/DECEMBER 24,1917
"WE HAD BEEN GROUNDED UNTIL MID-MORNING BY THE WEATHER..."
EVEN THE EAGLE MUST BOW TO THE WEATHER, EH, HERR RITTMEISTER?
NO. IT WILL CLEAR, SCHMIDT. PREPARE MY FLIGHT SUIT

WEISS... STICK TO MY LEFT WING.
MRAUS... STAY WITH WEISS. HE'S FLOWN THIS WEATHER BEFORE.


"RISING SUN AND INCREASED WIND THINNED THE FOG AND BROKE THE OVERCAST..

"I ORDERED MY FLEDGLINGS TO THEIR PLANES...

"...AND PRAYED WE WOULDN'T LOSE MAN OR MACHINE TO THE COLD BEFORE ENGAGING THE ENEMY."

"WE WERE 4000 KILOMETERS FROM THE GERMAN LINES... JUST WEST OF LEIGH. WHEN WE ENGAGED THE ENEMY..."
MMMMMMM

KRAM
FLAM! THEN THE BRITISH WILL ATTACK...
POW

...FROM ABOVE!!
TOK TOK TOK TOK
SPIDS AND CAMELS! BREAK FORMATION!!
TAK TAK TAK

SKREEEEE!

BM

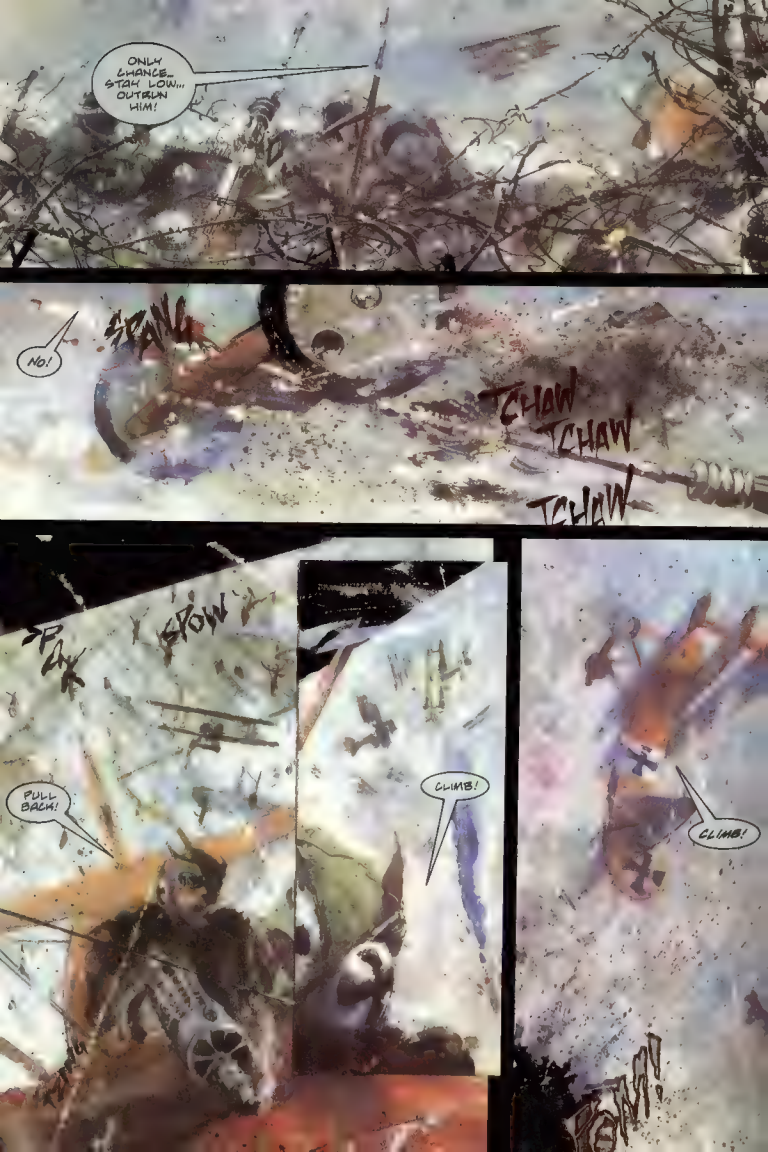
POOM!
TOK TOK TOK
TOK TOK TOK
ZIU
TAK TAK TAK
TAK TAK TAK

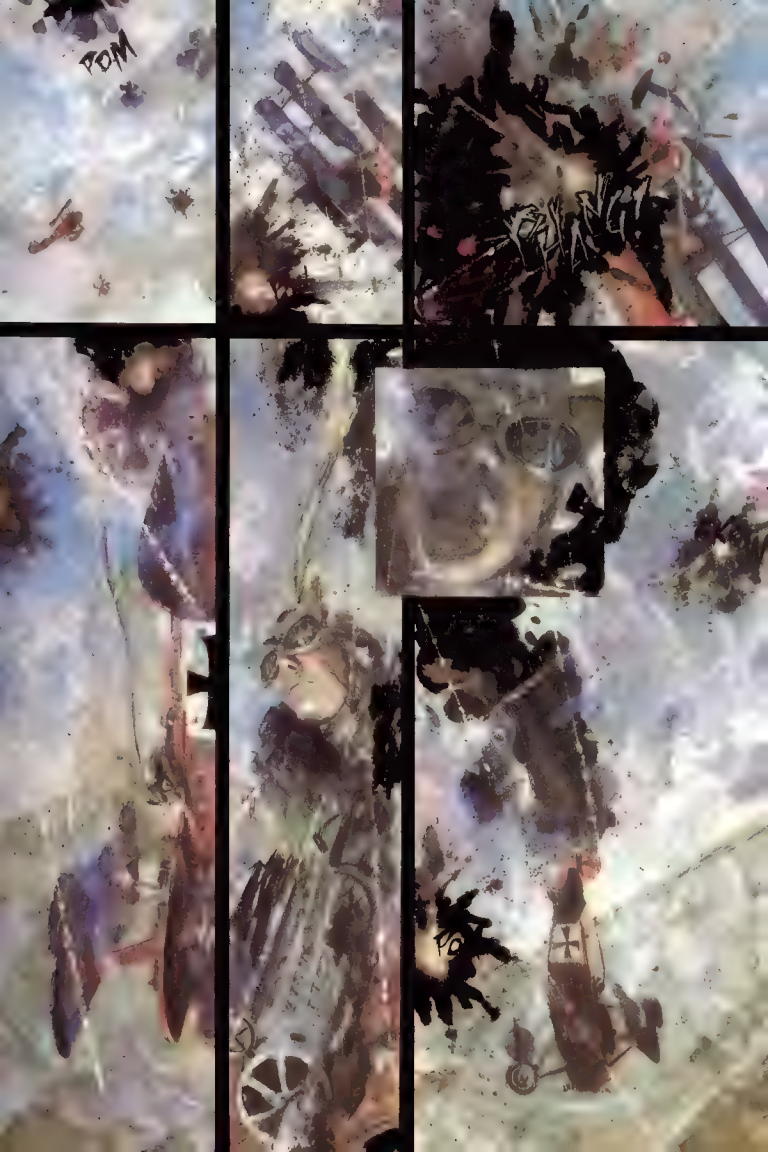
CLIMB! EVERYONE!
CLIMB!
MY GOD! WHERE'S WEISS?!
TAK TAK TAK TAK
TAK TAK
EEEEOOOOO
TOO MUCH SMOKE... I'VE LOST HIM!...
AND KRAUS IS IN TROUBLE!!

ONS CHANCE!!...
FIRE! FIRE!!
GOD!
NO!
TOK TOK
TOK TOK
KRAUS!!
POM
EEE
EEEE

GOOD KILL...
...ACCEPT MY CONGRATULATIONS.
THIP
TAK TAK
TAK TAK
TOK TOK TOK
TOK TOK
UNH!
FIP

uhh!
TOK TOK TOK
IDIOT! LEFT MYSELF OPEN!!
TOK TOK
THAD
THAD
TOK
GOT HIM!
BUT THE SECOND
..ANTICIPATED MY MANEUVER.
AN IMMELMANN..
..MIGHT..


ONLY CHANCE... STAY LOW... OUTRUN HIM!
NO!
SPANG
TCHAW
TCHAW
TCHAW
SPOW
FULL BACK!
CLIMB!
CLIMB!
POW!


POM

EEOOKKSSHHUU!!

FIRE! PETROL SOAKING MY SUIT!

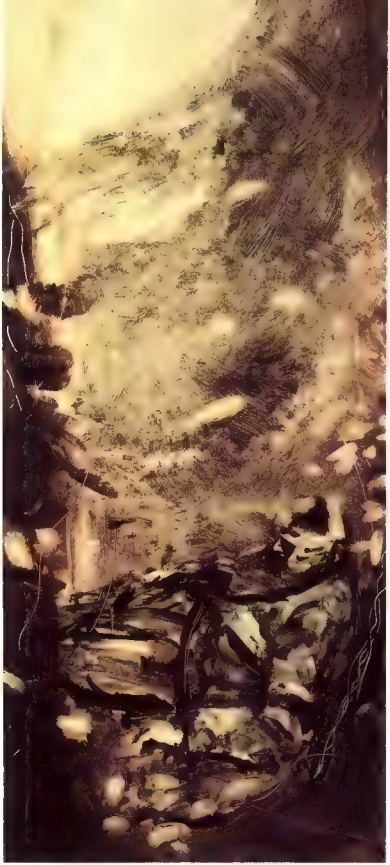
B-BELTS!!

"HITTING THE ICE BELOW, I NEARLY LOST CONSCIOUSNESS.

"BUT I MANAGED TO HANG ON LONG ENOUGH TO ROLL DOWN THE EMBANKMENT, INTO A BARRIER OF BARBED WIRE.

"THE METAL BIT THROUGH MY SUIT. THE SHARPNESS OF THE PAIN CLEARED MY HEAD FOR A MOMENT..."

ABOVE ME, I SAW THE REMNANTS OF THE VICTORIOUS ENEMY SQUADRON FLYING A PROUD FORMATION HOMEWARD.
EXCUSE ME..
VISITING HOURS ARE OVER. YOU MUST LEAVE.
TOMORROW. MAYBE WE CAN GO OUTSIDE.
I AM TIRED OF THIS ROOM.



Black and hideous to me,
the tragedy that gathers,
and I'm sick beyond cure
to have lived on to see it.
The tide that bore us along
was then all the while moving
to <u>this</u> as its grand Niagara
— yet what a blessing we
didn't know it.
It seems to me to undo
everything, everything that
was ours, in the most
horrible retroactive way —
but I avert my face from
the monstrous scene.

— Henry James,
to Rhoda Broughton/1914

CHAPTER THREE

BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM

DAMN!
JESUS...
SSSSSHH
NO MORE...
NO MORE...
GOOD EVENING, YOUNG MAN

EVENING... SORRY I'M LATE-- MY EDITOR KEPT ME UP HALF THE NIGHT. HE'S LOOKING FOR A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT ANGLE ON THIS STORY, BUT I THINK WE SHOULD JUST PICK UP WHERE WE..
. SHIT.
LOOK. THIS IS ALL BULLSHIT. I HAVE NO EDITOR, I'M NOT WITH ANY MAGAZINE... HELL... I DON'T KNOW WHY I'M HERE..
I KNOW..
YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO TELL ME. SOMETHING YOU'VE BEEN HOLDING INSIDE YOURSELF FOR A VERY LONG TIME.
SOMETHING YOU'VE DONE

I KNOW WHAT I'VE DONE. I CAN'T EVER FORGET IT. IT'S EATING ME ALIVE. BIT BY BIT, EVERY TIME I CLOSE MY EYES. BUT WHEN I LOOK AT YOU, I SEE A SURVIVOR. AND MAYBE THAT'S WHY I CAME-- TO GET SOME ANSWERS.
PERHAPS ANOTHER TIME. TODAY, I LISTEN.

I WAS .N CU CHI PROVINCE, JUST SOUTH OF THE IRON TRIANGLE.

I WAS A TUNNEL RAT

DO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT IS?

"WE'D LOAD ONTO CHOPPERS AND FLY TO CERTAIN HOT SPOTS...

"...FOR US THAT MEANT UNDERGROUND...

...THE TUNNELS.

"THE VIETNAMESE BELIEVE THAT THE LAND IS SACRED, AND THAT WHEN A MAN DIES, HIS SOUL SURVIVES, BURIED WITH THE BONES OF HIS ANCESTORS. WHAT BETTER PLACE TO DIE FIGHTING FOR THEIR BIRTHRIGHT?

"UNDERGROUND, YOU ASSUME YOU'RE NEVER GOING TO GET OUT ALIVE...AND THAT MAKES IT EASIER. BUT SOMEHOW, I'D SURVIVED AND NOW, I WAS TWO WEEKS SHORT. THAT WAS ALL. FOURTEEN DAYS AND I'D BE BACK IN THE WORLD. SUDDENLY, I REMEMBERED WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO BE REALLY SCARED.

"ME 'N' KRAZY WERE BREAKING IN A NEW GUY THAT DAY... HUGHES. HE'D ONLY BEEN IN COUNTRY ABOUT A WEEK AND WAS SCARED TO DEATH."

...N'T SIGN UP FOR THIS KINDA SHIT! DON'T LIKE SMALL PLACES, MAN.

I AIN'T NO SNAKE. CAN'T MOVE AROUND DOWN HERE.

SSSSHHH!

THUK

SHHH! MY ASS!

TELL 'IM TO SHUT THE HELL UP!

SOMETHIN'S HERE.

CHRIST! I KNOW THESE GUYS..

BURKHARDT, JONES, HUNTER, STRAHAN... THEY'VE BEEN MISSING FOR WEEKS!

THOSE SONSABITCHES..

"...LOOK WHAT THEY D'D TO 'EM!

THAT'S IT!

PAYBACK TIME!

AWRIGHT YOU GOOK BASTARDS..

"KRAZY HAD BEEN BLOODED MORE THAN ONCE CRAWLING THROUGH THOSE TRAPDOORS AND SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER. I'D NEVER SEEN HIM LOSE IT BEFORE--BUT THAT DAY HE JUST SNAPPED."

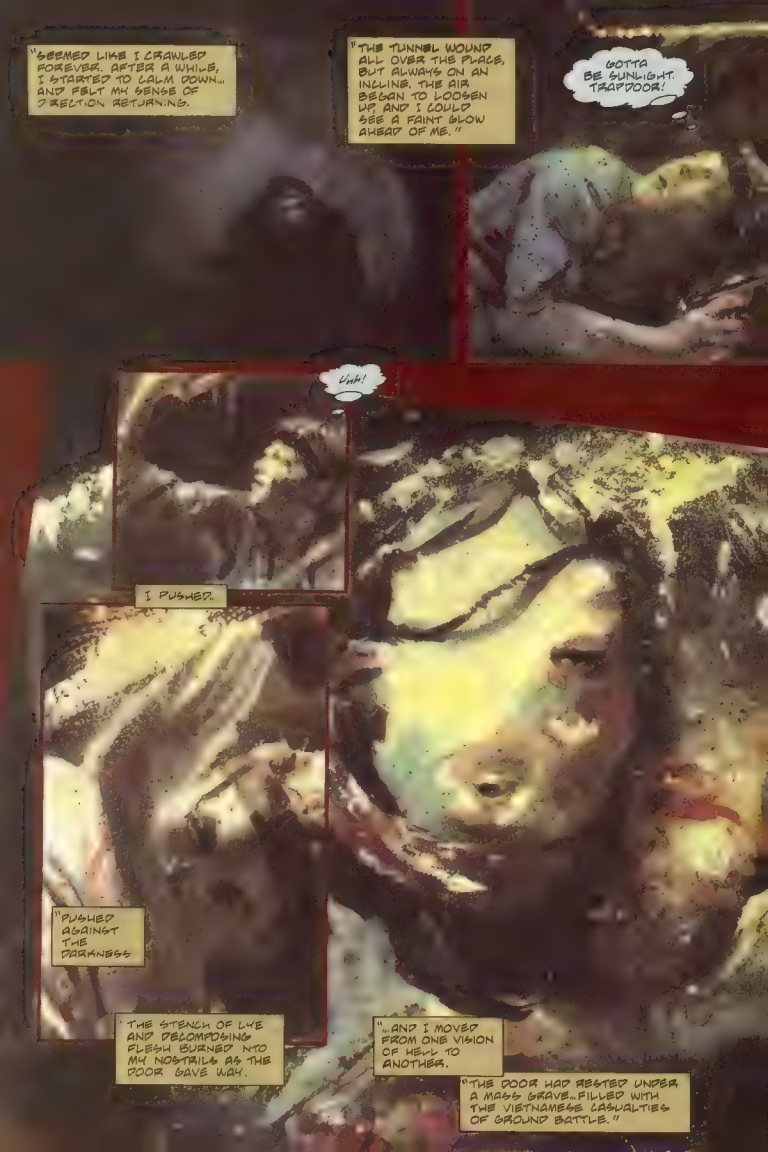
"COME TO POPPA..

"THEY SAY THAT IN THE END EITHER THE ENEMY'LL GET YOU OR YOU'LL GET YOURSELF."

POW
POW
"MAJOR SHIT WAS GOING DOWN... THE SHOTS, THE SCREAMS, ALL MINGLED WITH THE BULLETS THAT EXPLODED PAST MY HEAD
"I DIDN'T REACT AT FIRST. BUT WHEN I TURNED AROUND, I REAL ZED.
"...IT WAS HUGHES SCREAMING. I DIVED BEHIND HIM... BULLETS SLAMMED INTO HIM... THEN I REALIZED WHAT I WAS DOING..."

"...AND I WAS UP AND FIRING LIKE MAD.
"HUGHES WAS HIT TEN, FIFTEEN TIMES BUT HE WOULDN'T DIE...
"HE JUST KEPT SCREAMING AND SCREAMING.
THEN.
IT WAS WEIRD. I KEPT WAITING TO BE WIPED OUT... BUT THE BULLETS NEVER CAME...
NOTHING MOVED I COULDN'T HEAR ANYTHING EXCEPT THE RINGING IN MY EARS."
PTCH
PTCH
PTCH
"...I RAN OUT OF AMMO. MY HANDS WERE SHAKING SO BAD I COULD HARDLY GET ANOTHER CLIP INTO THE GUN.

"IT WAS THE LOUDEST SILENCE I'D EVER HEARD. THE SMOKE STUNG MY EYES AND THE SMELL OF GUNPOWDER AND BLOOD WAS EVERYWHERE... YOU COULD ALMOST TASTE IT.
"I COULDN'T CHECK, BUT I KNEW KRAZY WAS DEAD AND HUGHES... I COULD FEEL HIM, COLD AND STICKY WET AGAINST MY LEG. SOMEWHERE ALONG, HE'D FINALLY DIED.
"I WAS TRYING TO CALM MYSELF DOWN, BUT MY MIND WAS TELLING ME TO GET THE HELL OUT OF THERE, SCREAMIN' LOUDER'N THE RINGING IN MY HEAD.
"BEFORE I'D EVEN REALIZED IT, I STARTED TO MOVE. BUT I COULDN'T LEAVE THE WAY I'D COME. THE BODIES OF THE DEAD BLOCKED THE WAY
"...SO I KEPT GOING FORWARD...
"...DEEPER INTO THE SHIT...
"...BUT HOPEFULLY, OUT OF THE TUNNELS."


"SEEMED LIKE I CRAWLED FOREVER. AFTER A WHILE, I STARTED TO CALM DOWN... AND FELT MY SENSE OF DIRECTION RETURNING.
"THE TUNNEL WOUND ALL OVER THE PLACE, BUT ALWAYS ON AN INCLINE. THE AIR BEGAN TO LOOSEN UP, AND I COULD SEE A FAINT GLOW AHEAD OF ME."
GOTTA BE SUNLIGHT. TRAPDOOR!
Uhh!
I PUSHED.
"PUSHED AGAINST THE DARKNESS
THE STENCH OF LYE AND DECOMPOSING FLESH BURNED INTO MY NOSTRILS AS THE DOOR GAVE WAY.
"...AND I MOVED FROM ONE VISION OF HELL TO ANOTHER.
"THE DOOR HAD RESTED UNDER A MASS GRAVE...FILLED WITH THE VIETNAMESE CASUALTIES OF GROUND BATTLE."

?
'I JUST WANTED OUT'
!
GOOOOKS!
HOLY SHIT!
TS MANNOCK

I SPENT TEN MONTHS RECUPERATING AT SOME BASE HOSPITAL BACK IN THE STATES. I DON'T EVEN REMEMBER GOING HOME. IT WAS ALL SOME WEIRD HALLUCINATION.
BUT YOU SURVIVED. YOU'RE ALIVE.
YEAH. ALIVE. NOT THAT I EVEN CARED ANYMORE. COMING UP FROM THAT TUNNEL... I FIGURED I WAS HOME FREE...
BUT THEN... THE BODIES...THE DEATH...IT WAS HAPPENING ALL OVER AGAIN...THERE WAS NO ESCAPING...
I WISH I HAD DIED.
DON'T SAY THAT.
IT'S BETTER TO LIVE. YOU'RE A YOUNG MAN. THERE'S NO REASON TO WANT TO DIE.
YOU OWE IT TO YOUR COMRADES...TO ANY WHO DIED THERE...TO LIVE

THE THINGS I DID TO SURVIVE... I THOUGHT ABOUT ALL OF THEM A LOT IN THE HOSPITAL. I WAS SCARED OUT OF MY MIND DOWN IN THE TUNNELS...
BUT IF I'D REACTED LIKE I WAS SUPPOSED TO, HUGHES MIGHT STILL BE ALIVE. HE STOPPED THE BULLETS THAT WERE MEANT FOR ME!
HE FELL AGAINST ME! HE WAS THE ONLY THING THAT STOOD BETWEEN ME AND DEATH. I COULD FEEL THE LIFE GUSH OUT OF HIM...
I USED HIM AS A SHIELD!
AND WHEN THE SHOOTING STOPPED I WAS GLAD IT WASN'T ME. THERE WAS RELIEF. IT WAS HUGHES AND NOT ME! I COULDN'T PRETEND AWAY THE RELIEF!
W-WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME? WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO SAY?

I-I DON'T KNOW...IF I HADN'T DIVED BEHIND HIM... IF I'D TRIED TO SAVE HIM...HE MIGHT BE ALIVE RIGHT NOW...
IT SHOULD'VE BEEN ME...

CHAPTER
F·O·U·R

If any question

why we died

Tell them —

because our fathers lied.

— Rudyard Kipling/1915

On learning that

his son John had vanished

on the western front.

THANKS. I'M ALL RIGHT NOW.
I WENT TO SEE HIS FAMILY, YOU KNOW? WHEN I GOT BETTER. THEY THOUGHT I WAS ONE OF HIS BEST FRIENDS. HE HADN'T EVEN BEEN IN COUNTRY LONG ENOUGH TO WRITE THEM A LETTER.
I TOLD THEM THAT HE'D DIED LIKE "A REAL SOLDIER." THAT HE WAS REAL BRAVE AND ALL THAT. IT MEANT A LOT TO THEM THAT HE'D DIED SERVING HIS COUNTRY.
ONE LOOK IN THEIR EYES AND I KNEW I COULDN'T TELL THEM THE TRUTH. AND I COULDN'T LET THEM KNOW THAT HIS DEATH WAS A WASTE AND I WAS THE REASON HE DIED.
I DIDN'T WANT TO LIE, BUT I COULDN'T STAND TO HURT THEM ANY MORE THAN THEY ALREADY WERE.
EVERYBODY NEEDS SOMETHING TO JUSTIFY DEATH... TO MAKE IT LESS HARD TO BEAR.

WE HOLD ON TO AN IMAGE OF BRAVERY TO MAKE AN INDIVIDUAL'S DEATH ACCEPTABLE, TO MAKE SENSE OF IT.
BUT HE SHOULDN'T HAVE DIED I'M RESPONSIBLE!
NO! NO INDIVIDUAL CAN BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE GOOD OR BAD OVER THERE. YOU WERE JUST A COG IN THE WAR MACHINE.
FOR YOU TO TAKE ON THE BURDEN OF THIS MAN'S DEATH IS WRONG.
IF HE HAD NOT DIED THEN, HE WOULD SURELY HAVE DIED LATER...
SOME MEN ARE MARKED FOR DEATH...
...WHILE OTHERS HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO SURVIVE...

I REMEMBER... AFTER I WAS SHOT DOWN...
...I MUST HAVE BEEN UNCONSCIOUS FOR HOURS. NIGHT HAD FALLEN, AND I AWOKE TO THE SOUND OF THUNDER.
ARTILLERY!
"I CRAWLED TO THE EDGE OF THE CRATER AND SAW MY TRIPLANE OBLITERATED BY SHELLFIRE.
"SHELLS WERE RAINING DOWN ALL AROUND ME. THE SOUND WAS DEAFENING...BUT THEN IT SUBSIDED, AND FROM BEHIND I COULD HEAR THE CLANGING OF A SPENT ARTILLERY SHELL BEING USED AS A BELL..."

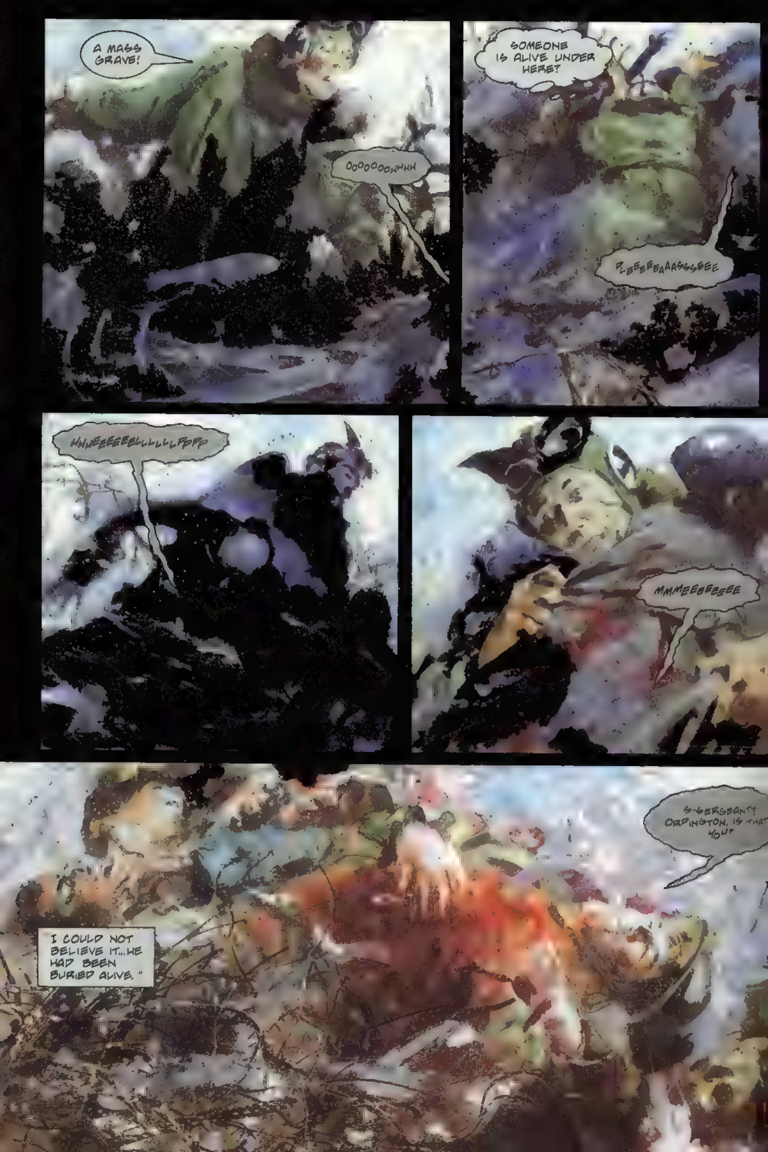
"...THE SIGNAL FOR..."
KREMPF!!
GAS!
NO MASK!
THE PLUME ON MY HEADGEAR! IF I CAN..
..CUT IT...
...AND SOAK IT...
I MIGHT MAKE IT...

?
SKIN BURNING!
OOF!
NO!
AIR!

"I- I DON'T UNDERSTAND. WHAT'S THAT GOT TO DO WITH ANY OF THE THINGS I'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT?"
"HE WAS THE ENEMY... I COULD RATIONALIZE HIS DEATH THAT WAY BUT IT DIDN'T MATTER. I KILLED HIM BECAUSE HE STOOD BETWEEN ME AND LIFE.
"IF HE HAD BEEN ONE OF MY COMRADES... IF THERE WAS ONLY ONE MASK BETWEEN US... I WOULD HAVE KILLED HIM TO SURVIVE... MY WILL TO SURVIVE OVERCAME ANY OTHER OBSTACLES.
"THIS WAS NO LONGER WAR AT A DISTANCE... THIS WAS NO MACHINE I WAS SHOOTING DOWN... THE SKY WAS NOT THE KILLER... THIS WAS TAKING LIFE WITH MY OWN HANDS... SEEING IT CLOSE UP...
"...I HAD FINALLY SEEN THE TRUE FACE OF DEATH... AND I KNEW I COULD NOT SUCCUMB TO IT."

"I REMAINED IN THE COLD, DAMP CRATER UNTIL DAYLIGHT, WHEN I AWOKE TO THE CONTINUED RUMBLINGS OF GREAT GUNS AND SCATTERED MACHINE-GUN FIRE.
"THE DEAD LAY STILL, ENFOLDED IN A LACY MANTILLA OF SNOW...
"...AN UNSPOKEN TESTIMONIAL TO MY OWN FIERCE DESIRE FOR LIFE.
"THE BATTLE CONTINUED ABOVE ME."

IF I CAN ONLY MAKE IT TO THAT SHELLHOLE...
GO!
OK OK OK
PWEEE
DAMN!
THUD
Ouf!


A MASS GRAVE!
OOOOOOOHHHH
SOMEONE IS ALIVE UNDER HERE?
PLEEEEEAAASSSEEE
HHHEEEEEELLLLLLPPPP
MMMEEEEEEEE
S-SERGEANT? ORPINGTON, IS THAT YOU?
I COULD NOT BELIEVE IT...HE HAD BEEN BURIED ALIVE."

...HE HAD BEEN BLINDED BY THE GAG AND COULD NOT SEE THAT I WAS HIS ENEMY...
WU-WHO IS IT? WHO'S THERE?
I MEAN YOU NO HARM. HOW CAN I HELP YOU?
JUST. PULL ME OUT OF HERE...AWAY FROM THE BODIES...
I'LL NOT MOVE YOU FAR.
EASY DOES IT, MATE

LET ME JUST LOOSEN YOUR TUNIC. I WILL TRY NOT TO HURT YOU.
IT'S NOT THAT BAD REALLY. THE PAIN YOU KNOW?
FEEL LIKE A BLIGHTY ONE THOUGH. MAYBE I'LL GET SENT HOME.
THAT WOULD BE NICE..GET OUT OF THE MUCK...AND HOME TO SEE MY GIRL...
"HE COULD NOT SEE HOW BADLY HE'D BEEN WOUNDED. DIDN'T KNOW THAT HE WAS ABOUT TO DIE..."
AM I ALL RIGHT? IS IT BAD? I CAN'T LET MARY SEE ME IF I'M MAIMED. SHE ALWAYS TALKS ABOUT MY FACE.. DO I LOOK ALL RIGHT?
EASY, EASY.

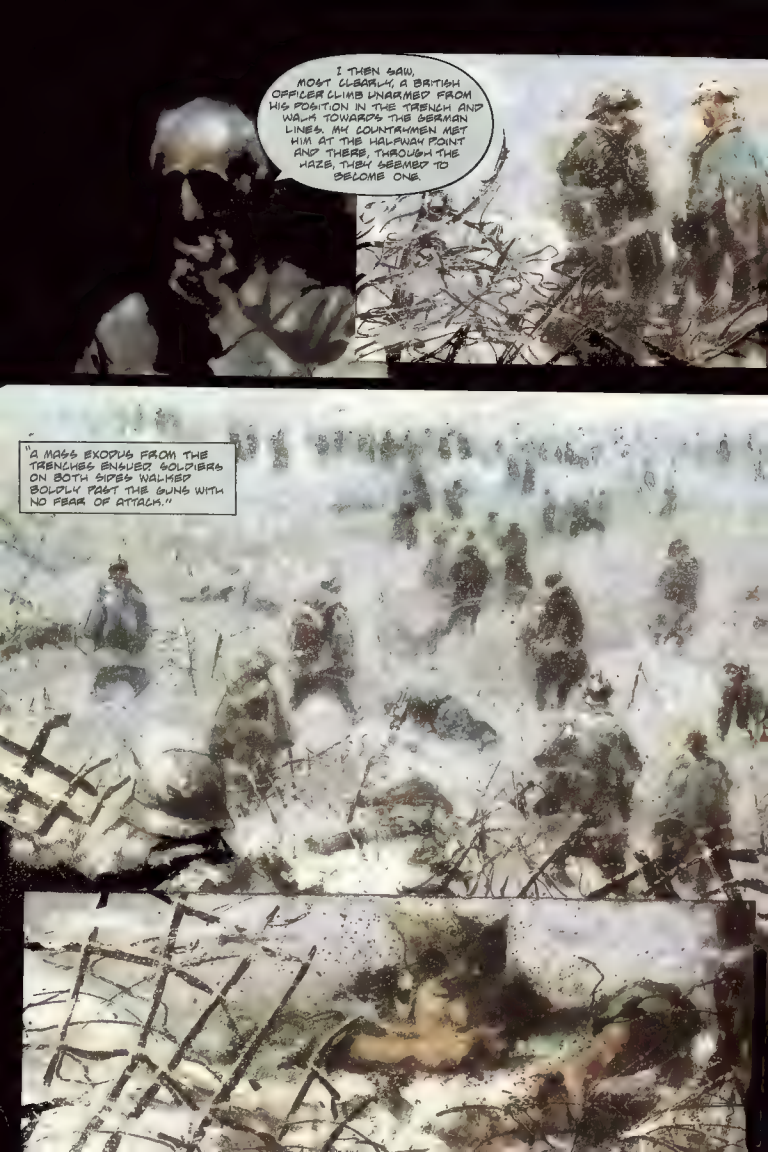
YOU LOOK FINE. WHAT CAN I DO TO MAKE YOU MORE COMFORTABLE?
TH-THIRSTY. HAVE YOU A RUM RATION OR WATER?
THERE IS NO WATER...
I'VE GOT SOME CIGARETTES IN MY POCKET COULD YOU LIGHT ONE FOR ME?
HERE...
THANKS, GOV. A LIFESAVER YOU ARE MAKES YOU WONDER WHY WERE F'GHTIN.

Mmhh! PAIN... BLOODY HELL!...
M-MARY? PERFUME... SMELLS... NICE...
"I COULD DO NOTHING TO SAVE HIM. FRUSTRATION ROARED WITHIN ME...
"ALTHOUGH THE SKIES ARE NO MORE FORGIVING THAN THE EARTH, I HAD BEEN SPARED MUCH OF THE TRUE HORRORS OF WAR.
"MINE WAS A STERILE WORLD OF FIGHTING MACHINES. NOT THE RASPING AND TEARING OF FLESH PITTED AGAINST FLESH. BUT NOW, MY COMFORTING ILLUSIONS HAD BEEN TORN AWAY-- AND I WAS LOST AND AFRAID.
"THEN... A SOUND... THE STRANGEST I HAD YET HEARD ON THE BATTLEFIELD...
SILENCE.

Despite all my hatred
and aversion for war,
I should not have liked
to have missed the memory
of those first days.
As never before,
thousands and thousands
felt what they should
have felt in peacetime —
that they belonged together.

— Stefan Zweig/1914

CHAPTER
F · I · V · E


I THEN SAW, MOST CLEARLY, A BRITISH OFFICER CLIMB UNARMED FROM HIS POSITION IN THE TRENCH AND WALK TOWARDS THE GERMAN LINES. MY COUNTRYMEN MET HIM AT THE HALFWAY POINT AND THERE, THROUGH THE HAZE, THEY SEEMED TO BECOME ONE.
"A MASS EXODUS FROM THE TRENCHES ENSUED. SOLDIERS ON BOTH SIDES WALKED BOLDLY PAST THE GUNS WITH NO FEAR OF ATTACK."

"I LEFT MY SHELLHOLE AND MADE MY WAY TOWARDS THE GERMAN LINES.
"I WAS USED TO MY COCKPIT'S SOLITUDE, THE HARSH THRASHING OF MY FOKKER'S ENGINE. THE STILLNESS WAS EERIE, THE SMELLS ALMOST TACTILE.
"BARBED WIRE EMPLACEMENTS... THE CRUNCH OF SNOW BENEATH MY BOOTS... CARRION STREWN ABOUT THE BATTLEFIELD... ALL LENT AN INCONGRUOUS SENSE OF UNWORLDLINESS AND UNREALITY TO THE ENGANGUINED FURROWS FROM WHICH I HAD JUST BEEN DELIVERED."

"AS I NEARED THE MASS OF SOLDIERS I COULD HEAR SINGING..
"SINGING, FROM THE LIPS OF HAGGARD YOUTHS WHO, A MOMENT BEFORE, WERE TAKING DESPERATELY TO KILL ONE ANOTHER.
"I COULD NOT BELIEVE MY EYES NOR MY EARS..."
OI, AN' HERE'S ANOTHER!
COR, YOU DON' 'ALF LOOK KNACKERED, MATE! SWIG?

WE'VE CALLED IT 'ALF-TIME, HA! LET THE GENERALS FIGHT IT OUT IN NO MAN'S LAND IF THEY'VE THE GUTS
IS IT OVER?
NEIN, HERR RITTMEISTER!
DON'T KNOW!
IT'S CHRISTMAS!

CHRISTMAS...

"I HAD FORGOTTEN THE DATE. I COULD NOT BELIEVE IT. MEN WERE GATHERING IN THE MIDDLE TRENCH-LINE BETWEEN THE TWO OPPOSING FORCES. SONGS BEGAN TO SWELL ON THE MORNING BREEZE. SOMEONE SET THE NOTE FOR "TIPPERARY," SWIFTLY FOLLOWED BY A TREMENDOUS BURST OF "DEUTSCHLAND UBER ALLES." AND SO WE WENT ON, SINGING EVERYTHING FROM "GOOD KING WENCESLAS" TO "THE BOWS OF BONNIE SCOTLAND," AS DOUGHBOYS AND GERMANS FRATERNIZED IN THE MOST GENUINE POSSIBLE MANNER.

"A TIN OF RUM WAS THRUST IN MY HAND, AND I WATCHED AS SOUVENIRS WERE EXCHANGED, AND ADDRESSES WERE GIVEN AND RECEIVED. IT WAS ABSOLUTELY ASTOUNDING. IF I HAD SEEN IT ON FILM I SHOULD HAVE SWORN IT WAS FAKED!

"I SPOKE FOR A TIME WITH AN ENGLISH SOLDIER.. WE DISCUSSED TRIVIALITIES, DRIFTING CURIOUSLY TO THE CLASS SYSTEM OF OUR RESPECTIVE COUNTRIES, I BEING A PRUSSIAN ARISTOCRAT AND HE A WORKING CLASS EAST LONDONER.

"HE THEN SPOKE AT LENGTH ABOUT HIS WIFE AND CHILD.."

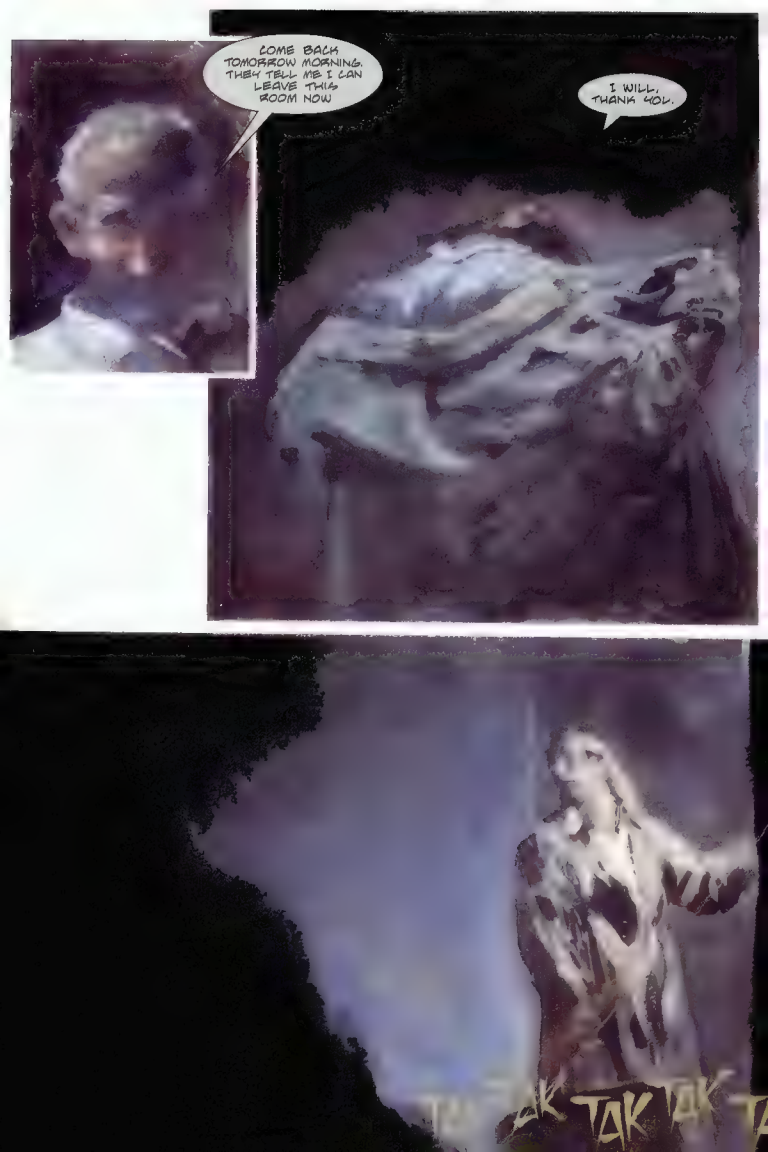
'EY, I'VE GOT A PHOTOGRAPH O'THE TWO OF 'EM! 'AVE A LOOK SEE?
SHES BEAUTIFUL, AND THE BOY... HE LOOKS HEALTHY! YOU'RE A VERY LUCKY MAN.
Hubh, LUCKY...
...I MISS EM BOTH. 'ARDLY KNOW ME OWN SON...
S THIS BLOODY WAR...
MERRY CHRISTMAS, MY FRIEND.
"HE NEEDED TO BE LEFT ALONE... SO I MOVED AWAY..."

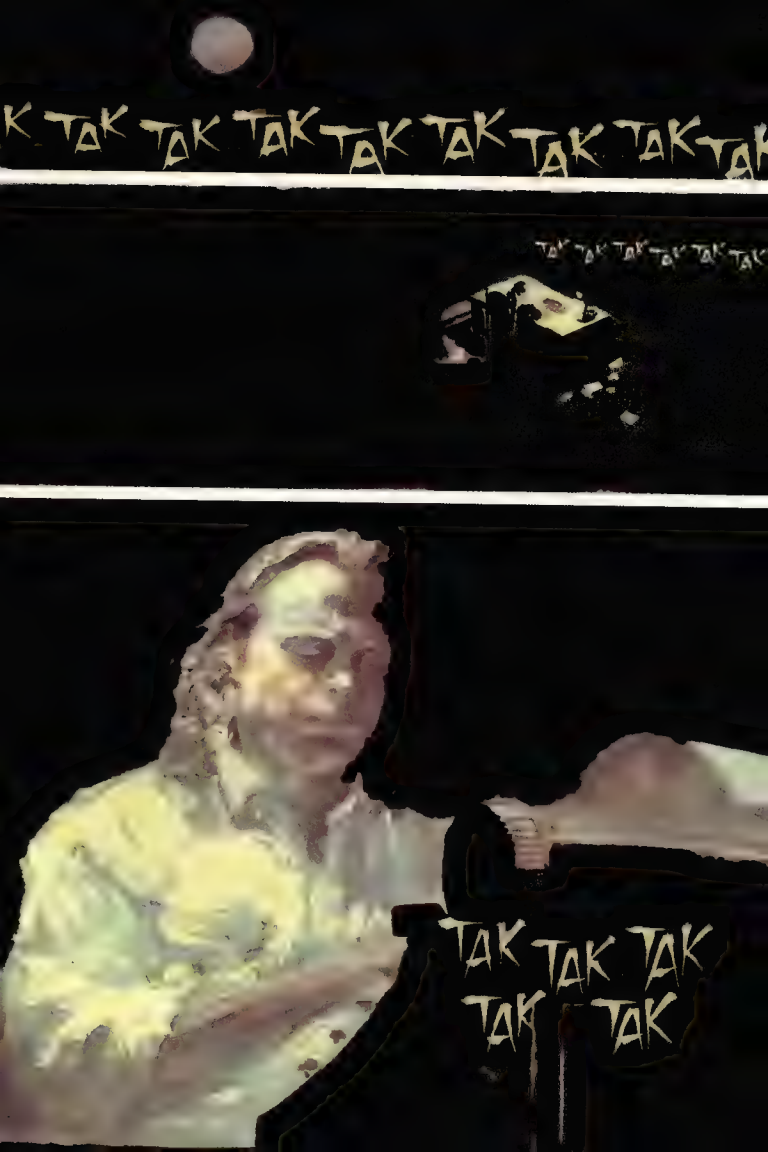
"I WALKED TO THE EDGE OF THE SCENE, AND SEATING MYSELF NEXT TO THE FROZEN BODY OF A FALLEN FRENCHMAN, WATCHED THIS CURIOUS CELEBRATION OF LIFE IN THE MIDST OF DEATH.
"I DID NOT BELONG HERE...
"I HAD NOT SUFFERED AS THESE MEN HAD... HAD NOT ENDURED THE SAME HARDSHIPS.
"I HAD DISTANCED MYSELF FROM THE HUMAN FOLD, AND NOW DESPERATELY WANTED TO EMBRACE IT.
"BUT THE WAR HAD CHANGED ME. I WOULD NEVER AGAIN BE THE SAME.
"BUT THERE...ON THAT FROZEN FIELD OF DEATH AND INTROSPECTION...MY FAITH IN HUMANITY WAS RENEWED."

BUT HOW DO YOU COPE WITH IT ALL? HOW CAN I LIVE WITH IT?
THERE IS NO SECRET... EACH PERSON EXPERIENCES WAR PERSONALLY, SEPARATELY. WE SEE DIFFERENTLY. WE REMEMBER DIFFERENTLY.
YOU WILL ALWAYS HAVE YOUR OWN WAR.. YOU WILL GO TO BED WITH IT AND YOU WILL WAKE WITH IT...
I'M STILL LIVING WITH WHAT I SAW...WHAT I DID. EACH DAY I'M FARTHER AWAY FROM IT, BUT IN MY MIND IT'S AS VIVID TODAY AS IT WAS FIFTY YEARS AGO.

YOU MUST FIND SOMETHING TO DISPLACE THE HORROR... SOMETHING THAT CAN SUSTAIN YOU... FOR ME...
...THERE WAS FLIGHT.
IN THE SKY, I WAS ALIVE... WHEN I GOT UP INTO IT, OFF THE GROUND WITH MY WHOLE BODY IN IT... THEN EVERYTHING WAS CHANGED.
AFTER THE KILLING WAS OVER, AFTER THE FIGHTING SUBSIDED... THE SKY BELONGED TO ME... AS MUCH AS I BELONGED TO IT. IT MADE EVERYTHING SIMPLE FOR ME...
...WHEN ALL ELSE FAILED, FLIGHT WAS THERE... I WAS FREE...

YOU HAVE TO FIND THE ONE THING THAT WILL SUSTAIN YOU...THE ONE THING...
...THAT WILL LET YOU LIVE.


COME BACK TOMORROW MORNING. THEY TELL ME I CAN LEAVE THIS ROOM NOW
I WILL, THANK GOD.
TAK TAK TAK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TAK TAK

CHAPTER SIX

Everything visible has again been thrown into the tumultuous abyss to be melted down. The past is relinquished, the future shudders, the present lacks foundations, but the hearts, should not they have the power to soar and hover among the mighty clouds?

— Rainer Maria Rilke/1914

GOOD MORNING.
BEAUTIFUL, AREN'T THEY? SO FREE... IF ONLY I COULD JOIN THEM.
I FINISHED MY ARTICLE...
GLORIOUS BIRDS!
I WANTED TO GIVE YOU THIS BEFORE I LEFT.. AND TELL YOU THAT I APPRECIATE YOUR ADVICE. IT'S MADE A DIFFERENCE ALREADY.
READ IT. I THINK YOU'LL UNDERSTAND.

I'M SORRY... I WON'T HAVE TIME TO READ IT.
BUT..
...I HAVE SOMETHING FOR YOU..
PLEASE, SOMETHING TO REMEMBER ME BY...
I KEPT IT FOR MANY YEARS, WHEN I DIDN'T HAVE ANYONE TO TELL MY STORY TO. WHEN I GAVE UP FIGHTING, I GAVE UP WRITING AS WELL..
...NOW THEY'RE YOURS.

THERE'S A DREAM I HAVE...
A DREAM OF DYING.
I WAKE UP ON A BATTLEFIELD AND THE SOUNDS OF GUNFIRE AND BOMB BURSTS HAVE CEASED...
IT'S ALWAYS NIGHT IN MY DREAM, AND YET, THROUGH THE GRAY FOG I CAN SEE A LIGHT THAT DIMLY ILLUMINATES THE SCENE.
I'M STANDING ALONE... I CAN SMELL SULFUR AND CORDITE... AND THROUGH THE WRECKAGE OF A THOUSAND WARS, I SEE HIM COMING TOWARDS ME...
THE ANGEL OF DEATH.
HE WEARS A HELMET OF GOLD AND THE TATTERED REMNANTS OF A HERO'S CASSOCK. HIS FACE AND HANDS ARE PALLID AND UNSCARRED.

I TRY, BUT I CAN NEVER QUITE MAKE OUT THE DETAILS OF HIS FACE.
SOMETIMES I THINK THE ANGEL LOOKS LIKE MY COMRADES AND OTHER TIMES MY ENEMIES.
I THINK THAT IF I COULD SEE HIM CLEARLY AND WHOLE I WOULD SEE MYSELF.
THEN..
...THERE'S A SOUND BEHIND ME, OR PERHAPS NOT, BUT I'M AWARE OF A PRESENCE...
I TURN AND SEE THEM ALL, THE WARRIORS WHO DIED AT MY HAND AND FOR THE FIRST TIME I'M AFRAID.
I'M AFRAID TO STAND WITH THEM, TO JOIN THEM IN THEIR SILENT VIGIL.
I TURN TO RUN, AND SUDDENLY IT'S DAY...
...THE SKY IS VAST AND CLOUDLESS, EMPTY BUT FOR AN ENORMOUS GOLDEN SUN. ODDLY, I CAN LOOK DIRECTLY INTO IT WITHOUT SHIELDING MY EYES.
THE LIGHT IS SOOTHING... CALMING... I FIND MYSELF BEING DRAWN TO IT.
THEN I SEE THEM..

I KNOW THEY'RE COMING FOR ME.
COMING TO TAKE ME AWAY WITH THEM...
AND THEN, FINALLY I KNOW WHAT I AM...
I'M A SOLDIER..
THE VALKYRIE.

I'LL ALWAYS BE A SOLDIER, EVEN TO THE END OF DAYS.

$24.95 USA
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The tide that bore us along was then all the while moving to this as its grand Niagara — yet what a blessing we didn't know it. It seems to me to undo everything, everything that was ours, in the most horrible retroactive way — but I avert my face from the monstrous scene.

❖ *Henry James/1914* ❖

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RACER X
FOR DCP